THE RESURRECTION AND THOMASES
John 20:24-31
Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32
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Gerald J. Gregg
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

As you will hear, the first scripture lesson takes place the week after the first Easter Day. The leading character is the disciple whom history has dubbed, because of this event, as Doubting Thomas. However, if one reads the gospel accounts carefully, it turns out that Thomas had been one of the most loyal of the twelve. On one occasion he alone was willing to risk his life to follow Jesus when the other eleven held back, petrified by fear. But on Easter Day Thomas had not been with the other disciples when the Risen Christ appeared to them. So, the Gospel according to John reports in Chapter 20:

> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

Most Bible scholars believe John's Gospel originally ended with those words. By telling about Thomas's reaction, the gospel writer was describing just how all succeeding generations were to react to the news of the Resurrection. Thomas is offered as the prototype for every Christian man and women. Rather than blindly accept some second-hand faith, believers are to be like Thomas--to question and discover at first hand. Especially that applies to our understanding of the Resurrection, the central article of our faith. We are not to ignore or gloss over questions and doubts we have. But we are to confront them squarely and work with them honestly because, as the Gospel of John indicates, that is the way to lasting faith.

Each person has the freedom and responsibility to develop his or her own way to reach for God's truth. Many diverse methods are quite valid. That is a basic tenet of Presbyterianism. What I propose to do in the next few minutes is to offer one person's method of understanding the scriptural accounts of the Resurrection and to urge you to branch off from that on your own, to sharpen and clarify your own ideas about the Resurrection.

persuade God to be gracious - are empty, meaningless, a waste of time and energy. There are no conditions, no more bills to be paid, no more obligations to be fulfilled to convince God to love. Jesus Christ has taken care of all that. What remains, Paul said, is to hear that incredible bit of news, really to hear it, to be converted by it in fact, from a person worrying about pleasing God to one who is overwhelmed by joy and because he knows that God is pleased. What remains is to hear that in a way that allows it to generate some related behavior - love, joy, peace, patience. There aren't any rules about this behavior, Paul said.

Now, in any age, it is very good news to hear that God has given you your salvation - you are safe. And as soon as these Galatian Gentiles began to appropriate it and enjoy it a bit, they were visited by teams of teachers from Jerusalem, dispatched by the church - which was strongly Jewish - to follow Paul and to tell the new Gentile believers that in order truly to be a disciple of Jesus Christ a person had first to conform to the law of Moses. When some of the new Galatian Christians, men and women with whom Paul lived and worked and came to love very much, became confused: when some tried to adapt to the dietary and Sabbath regulations and submitted to circumcision, Paul wrote a blistering letter which is angry and at times vindictive. "I wish those who were confusing you would mutilate themselves..." he wrote, and that is a polite translation of what Paul actually said he hoped these earnest people would do to themselves. The letter is magnificent: it is the cornerstone of the idea of Christian freedom. It was the foundation of the Protestant Reformation and it has spoken to the millions upon millions of Christian men and women who have heard the good news in political or economic bondage and in those circumstances have learned the meaning of freedom. It has spoken to millions of Christians living with a heavy load of personal guilt, unable ever to do enough to create for themselves a blessed sense of forgiveness, redemption. It has been salvation for many.

But there is another side to this matter, and Paul gets to it near the end of the letter. "You were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." How in the world can you be free and a servant at the same time? What does it mean to be free if you can't do what you want to do?

Some of the Galatians and their cousins over in Corinth particularly, heard the Gospel of freedom as permission to do whatever they wanted to do. "Hurray!" they said. "If God isn't going to love us any more for obeying the rules, why bother? Let's do our own thing!" And they did. In the name of Christian freedom they lived it up. Over in Corinth they drank too much communion wine and turned the sacrament of the Lord's Supper into an orgy. "Why now? God still loves us. Paul said so - they reasoned, with some logic.

Something important is missing from that argument, obviously. Freedom may be that which makes us human: it may be the differentiation between human beings who can decide what to do and animals who simply answer hormones and instincts. But raw freedom - pure freedom - the simple absence of necessity not only isn't the point in a Christian sense, it has a way of becoming anarchy, in the final analysis seems to give rise to a new kind of bondage.

Now we take careful note of one important fact. We know that several additions and changes were made in the books of the New Testament as they were gathered together in the first centuries. It would have been a simple matter to edit all references to the Resurrection so that a uniform picture was given. Such editing was a common thing. But no such editing was done here, although the difficulties in the accounts are very transparent. Why didn't one of the compilers smooth things over?

There are two reasons: First, the crucial fact in all this is that Christ is triumphant over death, that he is risen to rule forever as the Living Lord of all life. This basic faith is profoundly represented in all the varying accounts in spite of discrepancies. Left alone, each account vividly conveys the author's faith in the Risen Christ. Editing for uniformity would have destroyed that.

I believe the second reason early Christians did not edit away, smooth over the discrepancies is this: They understood, perhaps better than anyone today, the absolute need for each individual to express the basic truth of his or her own faith. They recognized that personal descriptions of deep faith in Christ and in his resurrection would differ in detail, and they knew that those differences would point out the insignificance of the details and emphasize the supreme importance of the faith basic to all-that Christ is their Risen Lord and Savior. They were so certain of Jesus' resurrection, so secure, that they did not need to insist on uniformity in expressing it.

That is what I conclude as I read the inconsistencies in the five resurrection accounts. Now let's go on to examine a different kind of evidence: What can we learn when we look at the points of agreement?

We ask, as a test question, "What did the disciples themselves expect?" We know that a person's expectations very definitely color what that person sees. Well, then, did the disciples believe because they were expecting so hard?

Our second scripture lesson speaks to this very point. We hear of two occasions during his ministry when Jesus was teaching his disciples about the fourthcoming Resurrection. Note especially how the disciples reacted to his teaching.

> And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men."
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> They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men,

do my thing and you do yours and let's not get in each others way" was the new social contract a few years ago. Self discovery, self affirmation, self assertion became a plague of simple selfishness in which doing only what one wants to do looked like strength and freedom. But that badly misses something precious about our humanity, our potential as persons, and it flies squarely in the face of the only ethical wisdom we Christians have, namely the obligation, the requirement, the necessity of love.

We do not codify our morality. We do not attach conditions to God's love and make salvation dependent on the basis of the rules we have kept. "Be good and God will reward you." is the oldest but most persistent theological mistake in the book. Goodness is its own reward. God already loves you - is how it is in Christian faith, and Paul fought the battle early. The heresy is durable, however. And so we need reminding. We are saved by grace and we are free to the degree that we commit ourselves in love to the service of others.

"Love, and do as you please" is how Augustine, 4th century Bishop in North Africa, said it. As a young man he had struggled with how to reconcile what he wanted to do with what religion told him he had to do. He indulged his appetites, lived as a libertine, sank deeper and deeper into meaninglessness, returned to the faith - and saw that all he was doing was submitting to a different kind of bondage. In his Confessions he put it memorably: "Love, and Do as You Please". St. Augustine saw it clearly: Christian freedom is proscribed, hemmed in on all sides by love.

It certainly isn't easy: it surely is not permissiveness. In fact it is much more strenuous to live by the necessity to love - than simply to follow the rules.

It is not easy to know how to live as a Christian. The issues with which we must deal are difficult, and the futurists are promising that the complexity will increase. "Pro Choice - Pro Life" on the abortion question almost pales by comparison with the ethical choices future generations will make about genetic engineering, for instance. Simple rules will not be helpful.

What will be helpful is the idea of Christian freedom: a freedom that does not exist in the abstract, but which literally comes into being when combined with the discipline of obligation, loyalty, commitment, and love.

One of the wisest teachers I ever had was Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology, University of Chicago. In a book of essays published on his 75th birthday, he commented on the relationship of freedom and obligation, particularly in the context of human relations.

> "Bach produced greatness within the strict musical limits of his time: indeed the severity of the limits called forth the magnificence of the accomplishment. Just as Bach accepted limitation and discipline in musical composition, so marriage means limits. Without limitation there is no expansion...The trouble with temporary relationships is that when there is a way out, the couple deprive themselves of the deepening effect of going all the way in...

A very troubling question for some people is this: In what form were the appearances? That question is answered when we recognize the nature of first century thought in Palestine. For Jews and Christians alike then, there was simply no idea of separation of distinction between body and spirit. Our modern concept of the soul being separable from the physical body--that idea has Greek origins. But for the Hebrews, body and spirit were completely fused. Therefore, there can be no doubt that, however a modern person might have seen the appearances, for the disciples--Hebrews, every one of them--Christ appeared in bodily form. That was the startling evidence which forced the sullen, discouraged disciples to throw off their despair and do a complete turn-around. In spite of all they had believed and in spite of all their tradition, Christ had risen!

All right, we say, the disciples were finally convinced. That's fine for them. What happened was obviously very real for them. But is there anything more? Is there any way to corroborate their evidence? Is there anything to back them up?

Consider this: If the appearances had been merely psychic phenomena, we would expect the belief that Jesus was alive to have grown less vivid as time went on. As the disciples ceased to "be in touch" and as skeptical third parties came into the picture, conviction would have weakened if the appearances had been merely illusory. But, in fact, the conviction became only the more settled, all the stronger, once the appearances had ceased. Those who had not seen were won over to just as living a faith as those who had.

Their continuing religious experience was based, not on reports from others, but on their firsthand awareness of the living Christ. That is what made and sustained the Christian Church. The existence of the church from the very first to now is itself a major part of the evidence for the Resurrection. And think what is behind the Easter stories in the New Testament: After all, why did people write the gospels? Precisely because they themselves believed in the Resurrection. They went on to put their lifeblood behind that conviction.

From all this, then, I conclude that the Resurrection is a definite historical reality. It is a fact which all the evidence proclaims. I do not pretend to understand it; neither can I explain how it came about. But then I know human knowledge is limited, especially in the realm of things which pertain to God's power. It is not surprising that I cannot explain the power behind the Resurrection.

The faith that lies behind all the descriptions of the Resurrection is the faith which began the Christian Church. It is a faith so firmly rooted in truth that men and women lived and died for it. It is a faith which proclaims that what is important is not uniformity, but instead importance lies in each individual's personal relationship with God, expressed in one's own terms. It is a faith which is alive for us today if we seek for it honestly and openly, as loyal disciples like Thomas.